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EDITOR'S PAGE

Plagiarism—How Serious Is It?

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I am currently serving on a university committee to investigate an allegation of plagiarism by one of our faculty members. It has some interesting nuances to it. A senior faculty member asks a junior faculty member to co-author a chapter for a book. The junior faculty member is very busy with NIH and industry grants, clinical work, and teaching, and puts off the assignment. The deadline for the contribution is at hand. A chapter is produced for the senior author to review and revise. In reviewing it, he is uncertain about a date that is mentioned, and he checks another textbook to confirm it. To his dismay, he finds that whole sections of this other textbook have been lifted verbatim into the new rough draft chapter. The junior author, confronted with this finding, indicates that it is only a rough draft and would have been further revised. Whatever the explanation, the chapter is dropped by the senior author. The new chapter will never be published, but can plagiarism occur without publication?

Prompted by this committee assignment, I took the opportunity to review a document entitled "Plagiarism and Theft of Ideas" (1), derived from a conference held at the NIH in 1993, sponsored by the Office of Research Integrity and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The conference suggested that four elements encompass plagiarism: 1) use of another's text, ideas, and/or illustrations; 2) failure to credit the original author; 3) implication that the material is that of the plagiarist; and 4) failure to get the original author's consent. The report also indicated that plagiarism has occurred even if it was caught and never published, as happened at our own institution.

Several themes emerged from this conference. It appears that plagiarism is far more common than many of us suspect. We probably catch only the tip of the iceberg. It is apparently very common among college students who are under constant pressure to write papers on various topics. Data was presented on an incident involving a programming course at MIT in which 78 out of 200 students were accused of cheating. A subsequent anonymous questionnaire revealed that over 80% had cheated during that year. The availability of manuscripts for sale and over the Internet proved to be a great temptation for college students pressured to produce a series of "papers" each academic year. At most institutions, students are usually suspended if they are caught. Should we do the same with faculty?

Self-plagiarism, of course, is a form of duplicate publication. *JACC* and other journals have clearly indicated the scientific misconduct attached to duplicate publication (2). Twice a year, when the HEART (Heart Editors Action Round Table) Group meets, there is invariably one or more cases of duplicate publication that we discuss. From my own vantage point, I see no reduction in the incidence of this phenomenon.

The report also described a computer program developed by Walter Stewart and Ned Fader at the NIH which can quickly compare documents and discover various forms of plagiarism. Personally, I have mixed feelings about such a "plagiarism machine" because its routine use would be such a sad commentary on the current world of academic publishing. In the high-tech world of computer images, it is becoming more common to publish the same figure more than once. For example, if it is a microscopic section, rotating it, cropping it, or enhancing parts of it can make it appear to be a new illustration.

Another theme discussed in the conference was that we don't teach much about this topic at any level of training. It was suggested that a mentorship of any kind demands that we define "plagiarism" and clearly categorize it as scientific misconduct. It was distressing to note how often individuals reviewing grants would keep copies and subsequently use material (especially background material) in their own grants or writings.

After reading this report, I developed a new appreciation for the problems of plagiarism. We all need to be reminded of the following.

1. Plagiarism is WRONG no matter what the extent. It is a serious form of scientific misconduct.
2. As mentors, we must teach this both by example and by explicit statements.
3. When we find it, we should deal with it firmly and appropriately at each institution.
4. We all need to be more sensitive to the insidious nature of this problem.

I commend the document referred to above as must reading for any academician (1). We need to do better as a scientific

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community. A "publish-or-perish" mentality must never degenerate into a "plagiarize-and-publish" mentality.

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